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ABSTRACT

Techniques and approaches used in a commercial French course offered at a state university are outlined. The course objective is to prepare American students for potential business experience or dealings in a French-speaking country. After background information about the course structure is given, the discussion focuses on the marketing segment, in which students simulate the real-life development of a product from idea to sales. The curriculum covers banking, telecommunications, and commerce, and all assignments take the form of business letters. The marketing assignment consists of the conception, market survey, financing, patenting, production, publicity, and sales for a new or improved product. As preparation, students are provided with a comprehensive vocabulary list, to be used as much as possible. The letters written for the marketing assignment are those written by and to the inventor/marketer, and include correspondence with a dissatisfied client. During the entire course, students will have written about three dozen letters, gaining familiarity with the mechanics, tone, and overall style of the French commercial letter. (MSE)

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A CLASSROOM EXPERIMENT IN MARKETING: INNOVATIVE METHODS FOR THE TEACHING OF BUSINESS FRENCH

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A CLASSROOM EXPERIMENT IN MARKETING

INNOVATIVE METHODS FOR THE TEACHING OF BUSINESS FRENCH

The last decade or so has witnessed a dramatic change in the perception of foreign language business courses. Once viewed as a vocational, i.e., non-academic, subject, the study of Commercial French, Spanish, or German is increasing in popularity across American university campuses. More and more Foreign Language departments are offering courses that deal specifically with the vocabulary, the style of expression, and the problems germane to such areas as Government, Banking, Insurance, etc., or that stress the art of Business Correspondence. Entire conferences nowadays are devoted exclusively to the theme of Foreign Language in Business.[1] In the realm of publication, this growth phenomenon is even more pronounced. Where, some twenty years ago, there existed very few foreign language business texts, and even fewer scholarly articles written on the subject, the market today, domestic as well as foreign, is fertile in publications relating to the commercial sphere. Specialized dictionaries are one particularly prominent example. Our rapidly expanding technological society, and the many new fields or disciplines born of this technological explosion, fields such as Computer Science and Space Technology, many of which have their peculiarly distinctive jargon, have created a need for dictionaries, to help layman understand specialist or specialists from one nation to communicate with those of another. This critical need for technical reference guides was virtually non-existent a few decades ago.

In French, recent years have seen the publication of specialized dictionaries for Psychology, Computer Technology, Economics, Business Management, Aerospace, to mention but a few, as well as general and technical texts dealing with such varied subjects as Banking, Hotel Management, Tourism, Export Marketing, or Commercial Correspondence.[2]

If we look at some of the recently published "Commercial French" texts, we will note that they all focus, with varying degrees of intensity, upon certain core areas. These include Insurance, Banking, Customs and Duty, Transportation, Telecommunications, the Stock Market, Domestic and International Trade, and Publicity.[3] Prominent too, though not quite as universally treated, are the fields of Accounting, Real Estate, Personnel Management, Taxation, and Agriculture. Virtually all of these texts devote a section to the art and skills of Business Correspondence.

By definition, Commercial French is a broad, all-encompassing field of study, and any so-entitled course will necessarily have to exclude a number of the aforementioned core subjects if it is to fit within the time framework of the average college quarter or semester. Most likely to remain on the program of study are those areas that may have some direct relevance to the student's immediate or eventual needs, such as Banking, Telecommunications, Transportation, or International Business. An American student who plans to spend time in France, whether travelling, on a student exchange program, or in any other capacity, is apt to have dealings of some sort with banks and post office, or perhaps be directly involved

with the public as an employee in a firm. Previous classroom experience in banking transaction, marketing and sales, communications, and indeed French business correspondence, can be a major asset under the circumstances.

In this paper, I would like to discuss some of the techniques and approaches that I utilize in my Commercial French course to attain the aforementioned objective, that is, to better prepare the American undergraduate student for any potential business experience or dealings in a French-speaking country. Although the discussion will focus primarily upon the Marketing phase of the course, in which students simulate the real-life development of a product, from genesis to actual sales, a few words about the overall structure of the course might be useful, to provide an appropriate background for our discussion.

Due to the brevity of the academic quarter, only three core areas can be studied. These are, in respective order, Banking, Telecommunications, and Commerce. It is in the last of these that the Marketing experiment takes place. As all assignments in the course take the form of business letters, the first week or so of the quarter is devoted entirely to a familiarization with the art of French Commercial Correspondence. The mechanics of the French business letter (format, structure, style, etc.) are closely studied, with frequent contrastive analysis of French and American epistolary models. At the end of that period, the student has acquired a certain basic competence in letter writing, which he or she will be able to apply to a variety of situations in the weeks to follow.

As indicated, Banking is the first area to be considered, as it is the most likely form of "business" contact or experience that the American student is apt to have abroad. Extensive vocabulary lists are distributed in class, comprising both general and technical banking terms.[4] The student is expected to assimilate this vocabulary and to utilize it throughout his correspondence, and he will be tested on it at the conclusion of the Banking phase of the course. Class and homework consist of business letters that the student is asked to compose, all of them typed and accompanied by a properly addressed envelope. The topics of these letters may vary widely, from the sollicitation of a loan, to a notification of overdraft, to a complaint about an error in a monthly statement of account, and the student will find himself playing various roles, e.g., writing to a bank about a transaction, then assuming the identity of a bank official in order to reply to that same letter. Whenever it is a business firm that corresponds, the student is expected to devise an appropriate commercial letterhead, complete with logo and all of the pertinent information usually found in a French commercial "en-tête". Some eight to ten letters are written during the Banking segment of the course.[5]

The next area to be considered is Telecommunications, i.e., all that is relative to postal and telephone transaction. Again, there are detailed vocabulary lists, testing, and letter-writing assignments dealing with such varied matters as the transfer of funds from one postal account to another, the purchase by mail of philatelic material, or a request for the installation of telephone service.

By the time the student reaches the third and most intensive part of the course, i.e., Commerce, he will have composed between fifteen and twenty business letters and have acquired a reasonable competence in French correspondence skills. He will have learned, partly through trial and error, how to properly organize his letter, how to express himself in a concise yet polite manner, and also which of the numerous available formulae and salutations to utilize for a given circumstance. He is now ready for a more integrated and challenging set of assignments. Through the medium of correspondence, he will take an idea or product and develop it, take it from the drawing board stage to that of actual sales. In the process, he will assume a variety of roles, from inventor to expert in the field, to competitor, to manufacturer, to publicity agent, to commercial artist, to sales representative, to merchant, to actual client.

Early in the quarter, the students in the class are asked to think of an idea, a service, or a product which they would like to market when they reach the Commerce segment of the course. This can take the form of a totally new product or of an improvement upon an actually existent one. There are no restrictions in the choice of ideas and the latter can be as fanciful as desired. All that I ask is that the product be within the scope of human manufacture and that the student be able to discuss its structure and function intelligently. The latter condition not only prevents the student from "getting in over his head" in technicalities, but also allows any student with special background or experience to make use of these to render his project more personally satisfying and rewarding.

Thus, a student whose other academic specialization (i.e., besides French) happens to be Computer Science may indeed be motivated to develop a gadget or service having to do with the world of computers, and be able to discuss it and write about it in a knowledgeable fashion. Whatever the student's special background, whether academic or experiential, it adds an element of personal interest to the assignments and helps to make his study of Commercial French all the more enjoyable. In order to ensure that not too many projects duplicate one another, and also to be certain that each such project is well within the individual's scope of ability, I screen all proposals. Seldom, however, is there need to reject any, or to recommend modifications, as all proposed projects tend to be rather imaginative. Among the more ingenious products that have been "marketed" in my course in past years are a bathtub that maintains the water temperature, a helmet for smokers that draws in and purifies the smoke, snow tires for bicycles, instant-dip nail polish, a toothbrush that dispenses its own dentifrice, as well as a host of other unusual ideas, several of which might indeed fill a void in today's real-life market.

As preparation for the Marketing assignments, a comprehensive vocabulary list is distributed in class, that includes terms relating to General Commerce, Marketing, Sales, Publicity, etc. (see Appendix), which the student is expected to utilize as much as possible in the subsequent series of assignments. First in this series will be a letter that the student--in this instance inventor--writes to an expert in the field to determine whether his idea has any merit or marketing potential. Depending upon individual circum-

stances, this expert can be an established businessman, a researcher in a laboratory, someone in academia, etc. The writer is to indicate why he has selected this particular individual, give a general description of his idea or invention, perhaps join an illustration to the letter, and express his appreciation for any suggestions that his correspondent might offer. Having already had substantial experience in letter writing, the student will know automatically that the tone of this particular letter is to be deferential, and he will know which epistolary formulae to employ to convey that feeling. The next assignment will be the reply of the expert. If the latter responds in an official capacity, i.e., as member of a firm or organization, it will be necessary for the student to devise some form of letterhead. The expert's reply will be an encouraging one, as might be expected, but it will contain practical advice to the inventor, perhaps suggestions for improvement of the idea or helpful hints concerning the latter's manufacture or marketing. How the student conceives or presents his scenario is left entirely to his imagination. What is important, here and in all other assignments, is that the exchange of correspondence be logical, concise yet informative, courteous, and that the tone of the letters be suited to the circumstances.

Having received this encouraging support, it will be assumed that the inventor is now ready to launch into the manufacture of his product. The next letter that the student writes will be to a bank or lending institution requesting financial backing for his enterprise, in the form of a commercial loan. The letter is to be addressed to a loan officer and should be quite specific in its in-

formation. Not only will a specific sum be requested, but a detailed budget must be submitted, indicating how that sum is to be allocated (e.g., supplies, personnel, publicity, etc.). References, both personal and commercial, need to be furnished as also a financial and business history. This letter will engender a reply by the bank. The loan will be granted, of course, but precise information is to be included regarding the particular type or category of loan, the interest rate, the terms of repayment, the needed collateral, etc. The student will here be able to utilize the technical vocabulary studied during the Banking segment of the course. For extra credit, the more enterprising individual may perhaps wish to prepare a publicity brochure, to be joined to the letter, detailing the bank's various services, or perhaps devise his own loan application or contract forms.

The financial basis for his business enterprise having been secured, the student-inventor is given a choice in his next assignment. He may write to the Patent Office or other official agency to register his product, secure copyright, or whatever the circumstances may warrant. In that letter, the product will have to be described in minute detail, and accurate illustrations or diagrams provided. A reply by the agency is to follow, acknowledging receipt of the letter and perhaps awarding a "brevet d'invention". For the student unwilling to engage in too technical a correspondence, an alternative assignment is that of writing to a real estate agency regarding the lease or purchase of a business property. Here, as in all other letters, the information provided should be detailed. The writer should indicate his needs insofar as space, location, and layout of the property are concerned, as well as his financial limitations.

The agency, in its reply, will offer several choices of office or warehouse space, accurately describe these, and furnish specific cost figures for lease or purchase of the property.

The following two assignments have to do with the publicity campaign for the new product. The inventor, now turned businessman, will write to an established publicity firm (perhaps one suggested to him earlier by the expert in the field) and ask for information regarding a sales or introductory campaign. He will indicate his budgetary limits and may, if so desired, request a specific type of publicity. The agency will reply and propose one or several options--this can take the form of an official brochure--detailed in its contents (e.g., so and so many minutes of television coverage at a given rate per minute, etc.). The second assignment is by far the most interesting one of the course, from the point of view of both student and instructor. It is assumed that a publicity campaign has been been launched, and that one of its features is an advertisement scheduled to appear in a national magazine. The student will now turn commercial artist and actually create this ad. Color, graphic layout, catchy slogans, etc., are the criteria in this assignment, as the student must ask himself if the ad would cause him to pause and read the message, were he leafing through the pages of the magazine.

Next is a brief circular, to be sent to interested parties (e.g., potential distributors, competitors, merchants, etc.), inviting them to a public demonstration/discussion of the new product, and giving time, place, and other pertinent details. This discussion

and demonstration actually takes place in the classroom, time permitting, as each "inventor-businessman" is allotted five minutes to praise the merits, describe the features, etc., of his product.. The other students in the class are encouraged to ask questions, whether general or technical, offer criticism, or demand clarifications. I usually assume the role of a hostile competitor and try to put the speaker on the defensive with respect to his invention.

The final two sets of assignments presuppose that the individual has opened a business and is actively engaged in the manufacture or sales of his product. In the first exchange of correspondence, a client writes to order a given quantity of the product. To this, the student-businessman replies with a letter of acknowledgement, stating that shipment is on its way, that the product is temporarily out of stock, or whatever his fancy dictates. Detailed invoices, specifying unit and total prices, applicable taxes and shipping charges, terms of payment, etc., are to be included in all of these letters.

In the ensuing two letters, a dissatisfied client writes regarding a problem with his or her order. This can be a matter of damaged or inferior goods, incorrect shipment, inaccurate billing, or any other plausible reason. The manufacturer/dealer will respond to that letter, offer apologies if needed, attempt to clarify the reasons for the problem, and propose a mutually satisfying solution.

All told, the Marketing segment of the course involves some twelve to fifteen business letters, bringing the total of such letters written in the course to nearly three dozen.[6] In the ever

changing scenarios of his correspondence, the student has ample opportunity to familiarize himself with the mechanics, the tone, and overall style of the French commercial letter, so different in many respects from its American counterpart. He is simultaneously exposed to a very "practical" vocabulary, one that he may conceivably be called upon to use in real-life, should he find himself in a French-speaking country. Though it does not appear very likely that the average student may ever be manufacturing or marketing a product, the simulated classroom experience nonetheless constitutes a valuable learning experience. The student is developing his command and understanding of the French language, but in a sphere that is quite different from that of traditional grammar, composition, or literature courses. He is writing in French, to be certain, as in all of his other language classes, and sharpening his grammatical and compositional skills, but the subject matter may well hold a greater interest for him due to its relevance to potential real-life situations. The fact, moreover, that he can use his imagination in the writing assignments, indulge in the illusion that he is actually introducing a new product on the market, adds a dimension of fun to the learning experience, making the latter all the more rewarding and enjoyable.

NOTES

1. For example, the Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages for Business and the Professions, currently in its fifth year.

2. Here are but a few representative titles: Harrap's French/English Business Dictionary; Dixeco de l'Economie; Le Français de la Banque; Dictionnaire Informatique; Le Français de l'Hôtellerie et du Tourisme; Dictionnaire Commercial et Financier; Dictionnaire Memento d'Electronique; Dictionnaire des Techniques Aeronautiques et Spatiales; Dictionnaire Juridique; French for Business and Finance.

3. For example in Patricia Cummins, Commercial French (Prentice-Hall, 1982), or Mustapha Bénouis, Le Français Economique et Commercial (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

4. As the course only touches upon three areas of business, and as most Commercial French texts cover many additional subjects, I have found it more economical and practical to prepare my own vocabulary lists for each section of the course.

5. Grading of student letters is in two parts. One grade is assigned for the "mechanical" aspects of the letter (grammar, spelling, proper syntax and idiomatic structure, format). The second grade, which carries slightly more weight, reflects the overall tone of the letter, the appropriate choice of salutations and epistolary formulae, the clarity, conciseness, or elegance of expression, and the latter's suitability to the circumstances.

6. For optional credit, students have the choice of one or more of the following assignments: An exchange of correspondence between distributor and retailer, in which a large quantity of the product is purchased at wholesale price; a progress report by the manufacturer to an associate, etc., describing the current state of production, and the correspondent's reply to that letter; a candidate's application for a position with the new firm (complete with curriculum vitae) and a positive or negative reply.

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APPENDIX: Sample Vocabulary List for the Marketing Section of the Course

Le Commerce
La Vente
L'Achat
L'Importation
L'Exportation
Le Commerce Intérieur
Le Commerce Extérieur
Le Marketing
Le Démarchage
Un Marchand en Gros
Un Grossiste
Vendre (acheter) en gros
Un Détaillant
Vendre (acheter) au détail
Le Client
Le Consommateur
La Clientèle
Lancer un Produit sur le Marché
Un Débouché
La Vente à Domicile
Faire du Porte à Porte
La Vente aux Enchères
La Vente sur Offres
Attribuer un lot au plus offrant
Une Vente de Liquidation
Une Vente de Soldes
La Vente par Correspondance
Un Concessionnaire
Un Représentant
Un Commis Voyageur
Un Voyageur de Commerce
Sa région
Un Réseau de Distribution
Une Commande
Passer une Commande à..
Un Commerçant
Le Patron
Le Gérant
La Gestion
Un Magasin
Un Grand Magasin
Un Magasin à Succursales Multiples
Une Boutique
Un Atelier
Une Usine
Une Fabrique
Un Entrepôt
Un Magasin à Prix Unique
Un Magasin d'Escompte
La Vente en Libre Service
Une Opération en Participation
Un Carnet de Commandes
Une Facture
Régler une Facture
Un Bon de Commande
Le Stock d'un Magasin

Un Stock Epuisé
Un Article d'Occasion
Des Marchandises Défraîchies
Un Rabais
Le Prix de Rabais
Mettre un Article en Réclame
Une Ligne de Produits
Le Plafond des Prix
Une Marque de Fabrique
Une Marque Déposée
Un Sigle
Un Acronyme
Une Remise Commerciale
Rabattre le Prix d'un Article
La Concurrence
Le Système de Libre Concurrence
Un Avis d'Ouverture
Un Rayon
Un Chef de Rayon
Un Entrepreneur de Travaux
Un Vendeur/Une Vendeuse
Le Directeur des Ventes
Une Vente Promotionnelle
Un Concours
Le Patronnage d'Activités
Un Comptoir
Une Vitrine
La Devanture d'un Magasin
La Publicité
Une Agence de Publicité
Une Campagne Publicitaire
Une Enquête
Un Sondage
Un Slogan
Un Spot Publicitaire
Une Enseigne Lumineuse
Une Affiche
Une Brochure
Un Dépliant
Une Annonce
Un Panneau Publicitaire
L'Emballage
Emballer un Article
Un Container
Un Salaire
Une Commission
Un Distributeur Automatique
Un Fonds de Commerce
Céder un Fonds de Commerce
Un Bail
L'Expiration d'un Bail
Un Brevet d'Invention
Un Droit d'Auteur
La Location d'un Magasin
Le Loyer/Louer
Faire Faillite

Un Prix Compétitif
Le Marché Noir
Un Article Bon Marché
Se Retirer des Affair
L'Emmagasinage
La Commercialisation
Une Vente à l'Amiable
Paier Comptant
Franco Port
Une Franchise